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C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 000317

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/12/2015

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SUBJECT: SYRIAN ELECTIONS: JOCKEYING AND BACKSTABBING START
A BIT EARLY THIS CAMPAIGN

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11. (C) SUMMARY: THE PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS CAMPAIGN IN DAMASCUS HAS GOTTEN MORE HEATED AND UGLY THAN EXPECTED THIS SPRING, WITH THE ELECTRONIC MEDIA BEING USED TO PUBLISH SCURRILOUS ATTACKS TO WEAKEN THE CANDIDACIES OF A KEY INDEPENDENTS LIST. ON MARCH 29, THE PRESSURE AGAINST THE LIST TOOK ON A MORE OFFICIAL COLORING WHEN THE OFFICE OF THE DAMASCUS GOVERNOR, WHICH IS CHARGED WITH OFFICIALLY VETTING ALL CANDIDATES WHO WANT TO RUN FOR PARLIAMENT (IN THE DAMASCUS AREA) ISSUED AN ORDER CANCELING ITS PREVIOUS AUTHORIZATION FOR ADNAN SHAMA'A, ONE OF THE THREE INDEPENDENTS ON THE LIST UNDER ATTACK, TO RUN FOR OFFICE. SHAMA'A TOLD US HE IS APPEALING THE ORDER IN THE COURTS AND EXPECTS TO HAVE A RULING IN HIS FAVOR WITHIN DAYS. THE OTHER TWO CANDIDATES ON THE LIST, IHSAN SANKAR AND BASIL DAHDOUNH TOLD A/DCM MARCH 26 THAT THEY WERE ALSO FEELING PRESSURE ABOUT THEIR DECISION TO RUN. THE JOCKEYING AND BACKSTABBING AMONG THESE INDEPENDENTS, MANY OF THEM WEALTHY BUSINESSMEN OR PROFESSIONALS, IS OTHERWISE SIMILAR TO WHAT HAS OCCURRED DURING PREVIOUS PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS, WHERE RIGOROUS SARG CONTROL PREVENTS ANY SUBSTANTIVE CAMPAIGNING ON ISSUES VOTERS MIGHT CARE ABOUT, BEYOND THE CHARACTERS AND REPUTATIONS OF THOSE RUNNING. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) THE PARLIAMENTARY ELECTORAL CAMPAIGN IN DAMASCUS HAS CONFOUNDED EARLY EXPECTATIONS AND TURNED (BY SYRIAN STANDARDS) QUITE NASTY. THE INDEPENDENTS LIST RECEIVING ALL THE ATTENTION -- AND ON THE RECEIVING END OF THE SCURRILOUS ATTACKS IN THE LOCAL ELECTRONIC MEDIA -- INCLUDES BUSINESSMAN IHSAN SANKAR, A FORMER MP WHO DECIDED NOT TO RUN FOR RE-ELECTION IN 1998. IT ALSO INCLUDES ADNAN SHAMA'A, A BUSINESSMAN AS WELL AND A PREVIOUSLY UNSUCCESSFUL CANDIDATE FOR PARLIAMENT, AND BASIL DAHDOUNH, A CURRENT MP AND ONE OF THE MOST WELL-KNOWN CHRISTIAN POLITICIANS IN DAMASCUS. (NOTE: SANKAR AND SHAMA'A ARE SUNNIS.) THE "WAR" STARTED IN MID-MARCH WITH A STORY PUBLISHED IN CHAMPRESS, AN INTERNET NEWS SERVICE IN SYRIA, ACCUSING SHAMA'A OF HAVING A CRIMINAL RECORD WHICH WOULD BAR HIM FROM RUNNING IN THE ELECTION OR SERVING AS AN MP. (THAT SITE IS OWNED BY A BUSINESS ALLY OF MOHAMMED HAMSHO, A PROMINENT INDEPENDENT CANDIDATE IN DAMASCUS AND AN EXTREMELY WEALTHY BUSINESSMAN/FIXER ALLIED WITH REGIME INSIDERS OVER THE YEARS, INCLUDING MAHER AL-ASAD, THE PRESIDENT'S BROTHER.)

13. (C) SHAMAA FOUGHT BACK, GETTING HIS VERSION OF THE FACTS ON THE RECORD IN ELAPH, ANOTHER ELECTRONIC NEWS SITE POPULAR IN SYRIA. WHILE THE STORY IS COMPLICATED, THE BOTTOM LINE IS THAT SHAMA'A HAS NOT BEEN CONVICTED OF ANY CRIME. HE BEGAN A CAMPAIGN FOR PARLIAMENT IN 1998 AND THE REGIME FORCED HIM OUT

OF THE RACE, ACTUALLY IMPRISONING HIM FOR THE NEXT TWO YEARS WITHOUT TRIAL, BASED ON TRUMPED UP CHARGES ABOUT A FIGHT HE HAD HAD IN GREAT BRITAIN 20 YEARS EARLIER.

14. (C) SEVERAL DAYS LATER CHAMPRESS PUBLISHED A STORY HIGHLY CRITICAL OF SANKER, ACCUSING HIM OF NOT PAYING HIS WORKERS AND OF BEING MORE LOYAL TO "FOREIGN EMBASSIES" ("ESPECIALLY THE AMERICAN EMBASSY") THAN TO SYRIA. SO FAR SANKAR HAS NOT RESPONDED USING THE ELECTRONIC MEDIA. ON MARCH 29, THE PRESSURE AGAINST THE LIST TOOK ON A MORE OFFICIAL COLORING WHEN THE OFFICE OF THE DAMASCUS GOVERNOR, WHICH IS CHARGED WITH OFFICIALLY VETTING ALL CANDIDATES WHO WANT TO RUN FOR PARLIAMENT (IN THE DAMASCUS AREA) ISSUED AN ORDER CANCELING ITS PREVIOUS AUTHORIZATION FOR SHAMAA TO RUN FOR OFFICE. SHAMAA TOLD US HE IS APPEALING THE ORDER IN THE COURTS AND EXPECTS TO HAVE A RULING IN HIS FAVOR WITHIN DAYS.

15. (C) SANKAR AND DAHDOUN TOLD A/DCM IN SEPARATE MEETINGS MARCH 26 THEY WERE UNSURE WHETHER THE ATTACKS AGAINST THEIR LIST HAS BEEN COMPLETELY DIRECTED BY THE REGIME OR WERE PART OF A FIGHT AMONG CANDIDATES (AND THEIR BACKERS, SOME OF THEM REGIME INSIDERS). ALL THREE CANDIDATES, LIKE ALL OTHERS SEEKING TO RUN FOR PARLIAMENT, HAD BEEN INTENSIVELY VETTED AND CLEARED BY THE SYRIAN SECURITY SERVICES. "SMI, PSD, AND STATE SECURITY ALL PAID VISITS TO MY OFFICE," NOTED SANKAR, WHO SHOWED A/DCM THE ORIGINAL LETTER HE HAD RECEIVED FROM THE GOVERNOR OF DAMASCUS, NOMINALLY IN CHARGE OF THE VETTING PROCESS, BLESSING HIS CANDIDATURE. THE ATMOSPHERE TURNED UGLY, HOWEVER, WHEN THE THREE INDEPENDENTS BANDED TOGETHER TO FORM A LIST FOR DAMASCUS, IN EFFECT CHALLENGING THE PRESTIGE OF THE TWO OTHER MAJOR INDEPENDENTS LISTS, BOTH BLESSED BY THE REGIME.

16. (C) SANKAR ACCUSED REGIME INSIDER AND WEALTHY BUSINESSMAN RAMI MAKHLOUF OF ORCHESTRATING THE CAMPAIGN AGAINST HIM AND HIS RUNNING MATES, EXPLAINING THAT MAKHLOUF HAD MAINTAINED A VENDETTA AGAINST HIM EVER SINCE HE HAD UNSUCCESSFULLY TARGETED SEVERAL YEARS AGO ONE OF THE SANKAR FAMILY'S MOST LUCRATIVE VENTURES, THE MERCEDES BENZ DEALERSHIP FOR SYRIA. ACCORDING TO SANKAR, IT IS UNCLEAR AT THIS POINT WHETHER MAKHLOUF IS FREE-LANCING, WITH THE LIMITED SUPPORT OF SOME IN THE SECURITY SERVICES, OR OPERATING WITH MORE VIGOROUS REGIME BACKING. WHILE SANKAR HAS NOT MET WITH THE SECURITY SERVICES (SINCE HE WAS VETTED), HE SAID THAT DAHDOUN HAS ANSWERED INFORMAL SUMMONS AND MET REGULARLY WITH FOUAD NASSIF (KHAIRBEK), THE HEAD OF STATE SECURITY. DAHDOUN REPORTED THAT NASSIF HAD VISIBLY GRIMACED AND EXPRESSED DISTASTE WHEN DAHDOUN MENTIONED THAT HE WAS RUNNING ON A LIST WITH SANKER, SAID SANKAR.

17. (C) IT IS ALSO UNCLEAR SO FAR IF THE CAMPAIGN IS DESIGNED TO FORCE THE THREE TO SPLIT UP AND RUN SEPARATELY OR IF IT IS A PRELUDE TO EVEN MORE HEAVY-HANDED REGIME INTERVENTION DESIGNED TO FORCE THEM OUT OF THE RACE ON THREAT OF IMPRISONMENT, AS WAS DONE TO SHAMA'A IN 1998. THE PRESSURE AGAINST THE THREE HAD SOME INITIAL EFFECT, REPORTED SANKAR, BUT THEY HAVE ALL DECIDED TO TOUGH THINGS OUT.

18. (C) SANKAR SUSPECTS THAT THE REGIME IS CLOSELY WATCHING THE PRESSURE BEING APPLIED -- BY MAKHLOUF AND PEOPLE IN THE MEDIA AND SARG DOING HIS BIDDING -- AND ALLOWING EVENTS TO UNFOLD. HE HAS PREPARED HIMSELF FOR ALL EVENTUALITIES, INCLUDING POWERS OF ATTORNEY FOR ALL HIS BUSINESSES, IF HE IS IMPRISONED. HOWEVER, BECAUSE THE THREE HAVE DONE NOTHING WRONG (AND THUS FAR SAID NOTHING THAT WOULD PROVOKE THE REGIME), SANKAR EXPECTS IN THE END THAT THE REGIME WILL LEAVE MAKHLOUF AND ASSOCIATES TO DO THEIR DIRTY WORK ALONE, WATCHFUL OF THE INTERNATIONAL SCRUTINY SYRIA IS UNDER RIGHT NOW. WITHOUT DIRECT REGIME SUPPORT, MAKHLOUF'S CAMPAIGN WILL FAIL, SAID SANKAR, NOTING HIS POPULARITY AMONG KEY DAMASCENE GROUPS, INCLUDING SUNNIS, CHRISTIANS, AND KURDS AND BUSINESSMEN. (COMMENT: SHAMA'A MAY BE IN A MORE VULNERABLE POSITION BECAUSE OF HIS PREVIOUS PROBLEMS IN RUNNING.)

19. (C) WHEN ASKED WHY HE HAD DECIDED TO RUN AGAIN FOR PARLIAMENT AFTER HAVING WALKED AWAY IN 1998, BELIEVING THEN THAT SYRIA WAS NOT READY FOR DEMOCRACY, SANKAR TOLD A/DCM THAT HE VIEWED THE CURRENT SITUATION AS MUCH MORE PROMISING,

NOT BECAUSE THE REGIME WOULD CHANGE ON ITS OWN, BUT BECAUSE THE REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL SITUATIONS NOW WERE MORE CONDUCTIVE FOR CHANGE TO COME IN SYRIA. HE NOTED AS AN EXAMPLE THAT KING ABDULLAH OF SAUDI ARABIA WAS TAKING A VERY DIFFERENT ATTITUDE TOWARDS SYRIA AND TOWARDS SAUDI ARABIA'S ROLE IN THE REGION, THAN DID HIS LATE BROTHER KING FAHD, WHO HAD BEEN MUCH MORE SUPPORTIVE OF THE ASAD REGIME AND LESS SUPPORTIVE OF AMERICAN POLITICAL INFLUENCE IN THE REGION. SANKAR SAID IT IS IMPORTANT TO "BUILD BRIDGES TO THE SYRIAN PEOPLE" FOR THE FUTURE AT THIS CRITICAL TIME, EVEN WITHOUT IMPORTANT POLITICAL REFORMS IN PLACE SUCH AS A POLITICAL PARTIES LAW THAT WOULD HAVE ALLOWED HIM TO CREATE HIS OWN PARTY (SOMETHING HE HAS TALKED PRIVATELY OF DOING FOR 18 MONTHS).

¶10. (C) COMMENT: THE JOCKEYING AND BACKSTABBING AMONG THESE INDEPENDENTS, MANY OF THEM WEALTHY BUSINESSMEN OR PROFESSIONALS, IS OTHERWISE SIMILAR TO WHAT HAS OCCURRED DURING PREVIOUS PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS, WHERE RIGOROUS SARG CONTROL PREVENTS ANY SUBSTANTIVE CAMPAIGNING ON ISSUES VOTERS MIGHT CARE ABOUT, BEYOND THE CHARACTERS AND REPUTATIONS OF THOSE RUNNING. IT SHOULD BE NOTED THAT IN PREVIOUS CAMPAIGNS, MUCH OF THIS BACKSTABBING WAS ORCHESTRATED BY THE REGIME TO PREVENT CANDIDATES IT CONSIDERED LESS FRIENDLY OR TOO INDEPENDENT FROM RUNNING OR WINNING. IN THE END THIS DUST-UP BETWEEN THE CANDIDATES MAY NOT TO AMOUNT TO MUCH. THE RACE IS SO CONTROLLED AND THE REGIME IS SO NERVOUS IT IS EXERTING HEAVIER EFFORTS THAN USUAL TO AVOID SURPRISES. NONETHELESS, THE LITTLE WAR ON THE WEBSITES SHOWS IN INTERESTING WAYS HOW SYRIA IS SLOWLY CHANGING, WITH NEW MEDIA DEVELOPING, FOR EXAMPLE (ALTHOUGH FALLING UNDER THE SAME OLD POLITICAL INFLUENCES). SANKAR IS ONE OF THE MORE SAVVY AND POPULAR NON-REGIME-AFFILIATED POLITICIANS IN DAMASCUS. THE REGIMES OF HAFEZ AL-ASAD AND SON BASHAR HAVE MAINTAINED A WARY DISTANCE, SENDING EMISSARIES FROM TIME TO TIME BUT NEVER SUCCEEDING IN GETTING SANKAR INTO AN EMBRACE THEY COULD USE FOR THEIR BENEFIT AND TO HIS DETRIMENT. IT WILL BE INTERESTING TO WATCH HIS CAMPAIGN AND PROBABLE RE-ENTRY INTO PARLIAMENT, FOR WHAT IT WILL REVEAL ABOUT WHERE POLITICAL EVENTS IN SYRIA COULD BE HEADED IN THE NEXT YEAR OR TWO.

¶11. (C) BIO NOTES: IHSAN SANKAR IS FROM A VERY PROMINENT SUNNI BUSINESS FAMILY. HE SERVED IN PARLIAMENT PREVIOUSLY FROM 1990 TO 1998. HE IS A PRACTICING MUSLIM BUT VERY MODERATE IN HIS VIEWS AND HAS GOOD RELATIONS WITH MINORITY SECTS IN SYRIA BECAUSE OF HIS TOLERANT VIEWS. HE WAS ONE OF THE MOST INFLUENTIAL MP'S IN PARLIAMENT DURING HIS TWO TOURS, PUSHING FOR ECONOMIC REFORMS. HE IS STRONGLY (BUT PRIVATELY) ANTI-REGIME, DESPISES BASHAR AL-ASAD, AND HAS KEPT HIS DISTANCE SINCE ASAD TOOK POWER, DESPITE INDIRECT MESSAGES INVITING HIM FOR INFORMAL MEETINGS. HE HAS BUILT A STRONG NETWORK OF FRIENDS AND SUPPORTERS THROUGHOUT THE COUNTRY, AND INTO DIVERSE ETHNIC AND SECTARIAN GROUPS. HE SEES HIMSELF HAS A POTENTIAL BRIDGING FIGURE FROM AN ASAD ERA TO A POST-ASAD ERA, BUT DOES NOT BELIEVE THE REGIME SHOULD BE REMOVED BY OUTSIDE MILITARY FORCE. HE WAS EDUCATED IN DAMASCUS AND THEN AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ALEPPO. HIS WIFE IS HALF ALAWITE (HER MOTHER), WHICH HAS ALLOWED HIM TO CULTIVATE BETTER RELATIONS IN THE ALAWITE COMMUNITY THAN MANY PROMINENT SUNNIS. HE SPEAKS PASSABLE ENGLISH AND ARABIC.

12, (C) BIO NOTES: BASIL DAHDOUN IS ONE OF THE MOST PROMINENT CHRISTIAN POLITICIANS IN DAMASCUS. HE IS A MEMBER OF AN OFF-SHOOT OF THE SYRIAN SOCIALIST NATIONALIST PARTY AND IS STRONGLY SUPPORTIVE OF DEMOCRACY AS KEY POLITICAL REFORM NEEDED IN SYRIA. DAHDOUN IS A MEDICAL DOCTOR BUT NO LONGER PRACTICES. HE WAS EDUCATED IN DAMASCUS AND FRANCE, BUT DID A BRIEF RESIDENCY IN THE U.S. YEARS AGO. HE SPEAKS ONLY FRENCH AND ARABIC.

¶13. (C) BIO NOTES: ADNAN SAMA'A IS A WEALTHY SUNNI BUSINESSMAN. HE WAS IMPRISONED FOR OVER TWO YEARS FROM 1998 TO 2000 TO PREVENT HIM FROM BEING ELECTED TO PARLIAMENT. HE IS REPORTEDLY CLOSE TO FORMER MINISTER OF DEFENSE MUSTAFA TLAS AND HIS SONS, MANAF AND FIRAS, ALTHOUGH THOSE

CONNECTIONS DID NOT KEEP HIM OUT OF PRISON. MOST OF HIS
BUSINESS INVESTMENTS ARE LOCATED OUTSIDE SYRIA. HE DID HIS
UNIVERSITY IN THE UK, OBTAINED BRITISH CITIZENSHIP, AND IS
MARRIED TO A BRITISH WOMAN.

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